

Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, Hamilton versus Jefferson on Popular Rule

Though both Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson served as members of President Washington's cabinet, the two held very different views on the newly founded U.S. government and the role of the masses in that government. During the 1790s the views of Hamilton and Jefferson would develop into two competing political ideologies and eventually form the basis of the first political parties in the U.S. The following are excerpts of Hamilton and Jefferson's views on popular rule. Notice each man's view of the elite and the masses. What role does each man see for the elite and the masses in government? Why?

Excerpts from Alexander Hamilton:

All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are rich and well born; the other, the mass of the people. The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct, permanent share in the government. They will check the unsteadiness of the second; and as they cannot receive any advantage by change, they will therefore maintain good government.

Can a democratic assembly who annually [through annual elections] revolve in the mass of the people, be supposed steadily to pursue the public good? Nothing but a permanent body can check the imprudence of democracy. Their turbulent and changing disposition requires checks. (1787)

Take mankind in general, they are vicious--their passions may be operated upon... Take mankind as they are, and what are they governed by? There may be in every government a few choice spirits, who may act from more worthy motives. One great error is that we suppose mankind more honest than they are. Our prevailing passions are ambition and interest; and it will be the duty of a wise government to avail itself of those passions, in order to make them subservient to the public good. (1787)

Your people, sir, is a great beast. (1792)

I have an indifferent [low] opinion of the honesty of this country, and ill foreboding as to its future system. (1783)

I said that I was affectionately attached to the republican theory... I add that I have strong hopes for the success of that theory; but in candor. I ought also to add that I am far from being without doubts. I consider its success as yet a problem. (1792)

Excerpts from Thomas Jefferson:

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his particular deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. (1784)

Men... are naturally divided into tow parties. Those who fear and distrust the people... Those who identify themselves with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the most honest and safe... depository of the public interest. (1824)

The mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. (1826)

I have such reliance on the good sense of the body of the people and the honesty of their leaders that I am not afraid of their letting things go wrong to any length in any cause. (1788)

Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights. (1789)

I am not among those who fear the people. They, and not the rich, are our dependence for continued freedom. (1816)

I have great confidence in the common sense of mankind in general. (1800)

My most earnest wish is to see the republican element of popular control pushed to the maximum of its practicable exercise. I shall then believe that our government may be pure and perpetual. (1816)